

Just before winter sets in, the area around the ranch smells the way hot dogs smell roasting on a campfire. The aroma must come from mesquite leaves floating to the ground. Now that my children are grown, I never buy the staple foodstuff of old. After the boys left, the half-filled Skippy peanut butter and imitation grape jelly jars fermented in the ranch refrigerator, and the menu shifted to solid food.

All the concession stand sandwich filling and PTA cookie mixes, such as 40 percent off water-packed tuna, peanut butter cookies coated in synthetic sugar, and fake pimento cheese spread were replaced by roast beef, pork loins, and lamb chops. Had anyone brought a canned wiener, a frankfurter, or any other type of meat paste cased in a red rind onto the premises, I'd ask the World Court for an order of summary execution by the gallows without a blindfold.

But smelling hot dogs roasting brought back the old days of picnics down on Spring Creek, and overrode my good judgment. On the next trip to the grocery store in San Angelo, I culled back the turkey and pork et al recipes.

I selected a package of beef wieners, not being in the mood to eat poultry products this close to Thanksgiving, or in the humor to be reminded of the negative influence the wrecked hog market had on cattle prices. Another reason I picked the ones labeled *beef* frankfurters was that I had just railed 998 pounds of dressed bull meat at seventy five

cents a pound for a three-legged Angus oxen whose papers alone should have been worth more than \$7760. I felt obligated to support one my major products, packer cows and discarded bulls.

Waiting at the car wash (vehicles in the shortgrass country have to be wet periodically, or the paint cracks,) I dug out the hot dogs to read the label. The wieners contained the following ingredients: "Beef, Water, Salt, Corn Syrup(less than 2%), Dextrose, Sodium phosphate, Flavor, Autolyzed yeast, Beef bullion, Sodium erythrobrate (made from sugar), Sodium nitrite, and Extractives of Paprika." Mesmerized by the water spraying on the pickup hood, I thought what a wholesome product to contain 12 ingredients.

Once in Mertzon, I stopped by "Motorcycle" John's Locker Plant, the one on the highway where you see a yellow Harley parked out front. John, I was certain, knew the purpose of the additives. Having spent his life in the meat business, John can bone a rib roast and butterfly a leg of lamb before most of the new age butchers can hang up their cap and put on a clean apron.

He said the three sodium compounds worked this way: "Sodium phosphate holds up to 20 percent water in the recipe, sodium erythrobrate increases the cure and adds a red color, and sodium nitrite is a preservative found in many packaged foods."

John went on and explained that the law required the product to contain 30 percent beef to be labeled *Beef Frankfurters*. The purpose of the rest of the ingredients were obvious, except "Autolyzed yeast." We fumbled around in the dictionary and concluded if autolyzed involved a breakdown of cells and tissue through self-digestion by enzymes, we'd better move on to calmer subjects like "beef bullion" and "paprika extractives."

Hard to find a safe place even to build even a small fire at the ranch. The last rain was the 23rd of July. So I wet down a spot around behind the garage out of the wind. I built a stick fire from mesquite wood. Surrounded by the calm of evening and lighted by moonrise, the smoke blending into the cooking hot dogs made me ravenous.

Number nine guy wire holds three 30 percent-plus wieners at a time. Before I thought, I'd eaten a half dozen on salad mustard relish wrapped with sourdough bread. By midnight, a gastric disturbance rumbled in my stomach of powerful enough proportions to make the bed tremble and crease my pajama coat under my ribcage. The sodium phosphate made my stomach so moist, the autolyzed yeast began gobbling up enzymes, starting the sodium erythroate to begin curing my insides. I was hiccuping so bad I was afraid to stand up to dial 911, for fear the stomach spasms would pop my neck out of joint.

Later, when I was able to talk on the telephone, "Motorcycle John" told me my symptoms sounded like

salmonella, or one of the five pathogen bacteria. Locker plant butchers live in constant contact with death on the kill floors. It's all right to ask their opinions, but don't expect them to be squeamish about prescribing an exploratory operation.

I've covered over the ashes of my campfire and thrown the guy wire over the fence. Next time I start craving hot dogs, I am going to remember the autolyzed yeast consuming enzymes to aggravate the sodium compounds to turn beef, water and paprika into food poisoning.